

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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CONFUCIUS.

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RHYME AND RHYTHM IN THE KORAN.

BY WILLIAM F. WARREN.

FEW English readers of the Koran realise that it is a book of poetry, and that its rhyme and rhythm have immensely helped its currency in all lands where the Arabic language is spoken. Our prose translations can give no adequate idea of the flow and cadence of the original. An unrhymed paraphrase even in the musical Arabic would as little represent the real Koran as an English prose paraphrase of Tennyson's Bugle Song would represent that masterpiece of melody. Undoubtedly the metrical swing of the book explains in some measure the great prominence given to the intoning and reciting of it in the mosques and schools of the Mohammedan world.

To illustrate these metrical movements, alliterations, and phonetic returns at intervals to a thematic keynote or sound, the last two of the one hundred and fourteen Suras are perhaps as good as any. In Rodman's translation they read as follows :

SURA CXIII.

In the name of God, etc.

Say : I betake me for refuge to the Lord of the Daybreak
Against the mischief of his creation ;
And against the mischief of the first darkness when it overspreadeth ;
And against the mischief of enchantresses ;
And against the mischief of the envier when he envieth.

SURA CXIV.

In the name of God, etc.

Say : I betake me for refuge to the Lord of Men,
The King of men,
The God of men,
Against the mischief of the stealthily withdrawing whisperer,

Who whispereth in man's breast—
Against djinn and men.

The original has been transliterated by an expert, Professor
H. G. Mitchell, as follows:

SURA CXIII.

*Bismi (')llahi (')lrrahmani (')lrrakimi,
Kul 'a'âdhu birabbi (')l'alaki
Min sharri mâ halaka
Wamin sharri gâsikin 'idhâ wakaba
Wamin sharri (')l'unnafâthati fî (')l'ukadi
Wamin sharri hâsidîn 'idhâ hasada.*

SURA CXIV.

*Bismi (')llahi (')lrrahmani (')lrrakimi,
Kul 'a'âdhu birabbi (')l'nnâsi
Maliki (')l'nnâsi
'ilahi (')l'nnâsi
Min sharri (')l'waswâsi (')l'hannâsi
(') l'ladhû yurwaswû fî sudûri (')l'nnâsi
Mina (')l'jinnati wa (')l'nnâsi.*

I hope I shall not be mistaken for a master in the tongue if I say that no knowledge of Arabic is needed to enable one to see and to hear the difference between Rodman's version and the original. The one is stiff, hampered, and not very clear prose; the other is poetry, measured, melodious, rememberable. It is not the highest order of poetry—the matter is too often sacrificed to form for that—but it is poetry that charms the popular ear, and wins for itself a place in the popular memory.

The Arabic is so rich in open vowel sounds that a successful metrical paraphrase in any other tongue is extremely difficult. Probably a first-class genius, using the Persian or Italian language, could come nearer to a real reproduction of the original than any one else. In a moment of recklessness, one of especial audacity, the present writer once tried an experiment to see what could be done in this direction in German. Keeping as closely as possible to the original, his result was as follows:

Im Namen Gottes, etc.

Sprich:	Vor all'n Hexenmeistern,
Tagesanbruchsherr, zu Dir,	Vor Menschen und Geistern,
Nehm' ich Zuflucht für und für.	Zu Allah,
Vor der finstern Schöpfung Schaden	Zum Allerhöchsten,
In des lichten Schöpfers Gnaden	Begeb' ich mich.
Begeb' ich mich.	Ach, ja,
Jeder Zeit	Akbar,
Vor hässlichem Neid,—	Menschenkönig, Menschenherr,
Des Abtrünnigen Trug	Gott der Menschen, immermehr
Des Flüsterers Lug,	An Dich
	Wend' ich mich herzinniglich.

Dissatisfied with this non-Koranic form of direct address, and especially with the frightful, if not unintelligible, compound with which it begins, he some days later tried again, and selecting *u* and *a* as the key-vowels, wrote in more condensed form the following :

In Gottes Namen, voll Erbarmen. Amen.

Nur zu Allah,
Aller Tage Schöpfer, täglich
Begeb' ich mich.
Vor dem Unheil der Natur,
Groll und List der Kreatur,
Neid des Neiders, Nachtaufruhr,
Spukunfug, und Hexenschwur,
Nur zu Allah,
Aller Menschen Schöpfer, ewiglich
Begeb' ich mich.

This, it will be observed, has fewer words, by more than a dozen, than the original, yet, thanks to easy German compounds, no idea is left unsuggested. It also gives a happier rendering for the ever recurring superscription of all the Suras save one; *Bismillahi ('l)rrahmani ('l)rrahimi* than seems attainable in English.

By this time the curiosity to see what could be done in the vernacular became too strong to be resisted. The result was a new conviction of the inadequacy of English resources in the broad vowel sounds, and of the hopelessness of effort in this direction. Possibly a Tennyson or a Poe could overcome the difficulty; but the following was the best that any responding muse had to offer in answer to my invocation. The number of words is almost exactly the same as in the original. Perhaps some more practised hand will favor the readers of this with something more satisfactory.

In the name of God, etc.

Say :

Unto the Lord of Dawning Day
My soul from ill shall flee alway.
From Nature's night,
Its hidden harm,
From ghostly sprite,
And witches' charm,
From envy's sting,
And tempter's lure,
Neath Allah's wing
I'll rest secure.
From men to God, man's Lord most high,
For refuge evermore I fly.